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Fanny Burney's *Cecilia*, or An Heiress' Search for Meaning in the World of Fashion

Frances Burney's *Cecilia; or, Memoirs of an Heiress* (1782) is customarily classified as the novel of manners but the text exploits a number of genres and literary conventions. *Cecilia* is undeniably realistic, with its "social analysis [which] is almost Dickensian [in the] forceful sympathy for those whose place in the structure of things is taken for granted," as the blurb of Oxford World's Classics informs. The scope of the picture of the eighteenth-century world of fashion, the multitude and diversity of characters inhabiting it as well as the variety of situations in which they are placed all prepare the ground for the realist novel. The eighteenth-century tale reads, however, as a "grim modern fable," to use John Richetti's phrase (1999: 229). Its theme is the eighteenth-century version of the fight between good and evil over a soul of an individual, that is, the perpetual and irresolvable conflict between the values of the fashionable world on the one hand and reason and virtue on the other – allegorised by characters encountered by the young heroine at the beginning of her adult life. The outcome of the conflation of realism and allegory, however, hardly leads to an unambiguous moral and clear life lesson. The world of *Cecilia* is the world upside down, where masquerades, bankruptcy auctions and suicides are chief entertainments and the order of the day, and the precious few who are rational and virtuous are considered as mad. Burney's romanticised conduct book scarcely instructs its heroine (and readers) how to resolve the inherent contradictions of the eighteenth-century world of pleasure, which functions in clear defiance of reason and Christian charity preached from every pulpit. Rather, it highlights the tragic situation of a novice confronted with the ambiguities of the life of fashion and forced to find a way between the madness of its dissipation and the insanity of non-conformity.

Yet, the novel of manners was supposed to elucidate the world rather than perplex the readers and the heroine. The genre is customarily described as an emplotted form of conduct books, serving the function of the guide to "social etiquette, social discrimination, and ethical conduct" (Kelly 1989: 44). The theme employed to illustrate the desirable and undesirable manners is most aptly

described by the subtitle of Frances Burney's first novel: *Evelina; or, the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778). An inexperienced heroine is confronted with the complex world whose codes, customs, principles and language she is supposed to learn in order to negotiate her place in society. Julia Epstein (1996: 200, 199) describes this kind of a protagonist as a "threshold" or "liminal" character, a character in "a state of ambiguous identity" since she is caught in the "conditional terrain of betwixt and between," between the "emergence from her father's protection and the subsumption of her identity into that of her husband." *Cecilia*, however, is hardly a guide to social etiquette bound by a romantic plot. As Jane Spencer (2007: 30) points out, Burney's novel by the foregrounding of the theme of "choice of life" is transformed from a "mere romantic story" to the story "of serious morality" comparable to Samuel Johnson's philosophical tale *Rasselas*. "Cecilia's love story," argues Kristina Straub (1994: 206–7), "repeatedly intrudes upon her Rasselas-like search for a meaningful 'course of life' outside the framework of love. Try as she does to get on with her life through books, good deeds, and friendship, the romantic extremes of marital bliss versus 'ruin' [...] continue to undermine her sanity to the point of actual madness." The ambiguity of Cecilia's identity initially resultant from her inexperience gives way to the ambiguity caused by her experience of the internally contradictory world, symbolically represented by her mad ramble through the streets of London, "gliding from place to place, from street to street; with no consciousness of any plan, and following no other direction than that of darting forward where-ever there was most room, and turning back when she met with any obstruction" until she fainted in a shop and was taken for someone who "broke lose [sic!] from Bedlam" (Burney 1999: 897).

The persistent ambiguity of the moral is surprising in a tale which otherwise seems like a modern allegory. The construction of the conflict in *Cecilia* is based on the clear-cut opposition of the impersonated vices of the fashionable world and the charity of a single quixotic figure of Mr. Albany, and the characters, despite the profusion of details employed in their characterisation, are perfect allegories for the values of the world. Cecilia's process of socialisation is shaped by conflicting counsels of her three guardians and Mr. Albany's warnings, which lead her to profound perplexity and the ultimate ruin. Mr. Harrel, the epitome of "dissipation" and "unfeeling extravagance" (Burney 1999: 99), unscrupulously preys on Cecilia's goodwill and by emotional blackmail swindles her out of her parents' fortune before his spectacular suicide. The other guardian, Mr. Delvile, represents "haughtiness with ostentation" (Burney 1999: 100), feels contempt

for the Harrels, "whose ancestors, but a short time since, were mere Suffolk farmers" (Burney 1999: 260), and to Cecilia herself, who is his superior in fortune but inferior in birth. As Mr. Briggs, the girl's third guardian, a scrooge attached to money more than nobility, puts it, "he's [Mr Delvile] counting nothing but uncles and grandfathers, dealing out fine names instead of cash, casting up more cousins than guineas" (Burney 1999: 333). Cecilia, thus, finds herself under protection of three figures representative of three obsessions of the culture to which she is introduced: pleasure, rank and money.

That the allegorical simplicity of the moral significance of the story is merely an illusion is signalled early in the novel in the scene of masquerade. As Terry Castle (1986: 260) explains, this is "the conventional situation: a novice heroine is about to undergo her 'entrance into the world,' an initiation into social life itself. [...] Confrontation with fashionable metropolitan life is Burney's primary metaphor for learning one's place in the symbolic order." Cecilia is the only person undisguised, using the privilege of being the host's inmate, and she is surrounded by masks, who allegorically represent the roles that their owners have to play in her story. Thus, although the usual rule of masquerades is to wear a costume contradictory to one's own identity, Burney uses the motif, as Castle (1986: 263) explains, "in the familiar eighteenth-century comic mode, as a paradoxical transparency of the self [...] Each betrays himself [...] by the oddly lucid form of self-estrangement each has chosen." Castle (1986: 264) describes the rational and comic treatment of the theme as "a suave, unambiguous, entirely rhetorical operation" but the topos has here also an important function to play: it reveals that the masquerade, where guests are expected to attend disguised, is paradoxically the only occasion where people can show their true colours and where the social order is no longer obscured by convenances founded on hypocrisy. Cecilia, as Craft-Fairchild (1993: 4) observes, is presented as a symbol of "a painful submission of the woman to male scopophilia," persecuted by a gang of admirers allured by her beauty and fortune but the only occasion on which she can see it clearly is, paradoxically, the one that requires the disguise of one's true identity.

The masquerade, "the attendant circumstance of wantonly accumulating unnecessary debts" (Burney 1999: 103), serves also the realistic function of depicting the Harrels' dissipated way of life, which is one of the dominant themes in the novel. The Harrels' lifestyle is, however, hardly exceptional in their times. Historians describe the eighteenth century as characterised by unprecedented consumerism in middle-class circles. As Maxine Berg (2007: 21) explains, the eighteenth century is a period when luxurious goods "[l]uxuries,

formerly negatively associated with foreign imports and with elite ostentatious display, gave way to consumer goods identified with middling-class domestic interiors and dress. Distinctive British consumer goods connected the middling classes to an economy extolling the virtues of quality, delight, fashion and taste, comfort and convenience, and variety and imitation" and defining the status in fashionable society (Berg 2007: 29–31). Small wonder then that the rise of materialist philosophy of life, so radically opposed to Christian glorification of non-material values, provoked comments from philosophers, who emphasised the discrepancy between, as E. J. Hundert (1997: xxiv) describes it, "divine injunctions and everyday behaviour," the latter of which required following the standards of fashion. Bernard Mandeville, Hundert (1997: xxv) explains, demonstrated that

> [p]ersons in the recently constituted commercial polities [. . .] were obliged [. . .] to respond to a revised structure of priorities if they were to satisfy their impulses. [. . .] Mandeville showed that the aggressive pursuit of wealth had now to be understood not as an activity properly confined to marginalized minorities, but as central to the self-definition of urban and commercial populations.

The evaluation of the social consequences of the growing importance of consumerism was not, however, unified. Mandeville's treatise, for example, aimed to demonstrate its public utility, Frances Burney's *Cecilia*, by contrast, joined moral condemnations of the emerging code of conduct and showed it as a violation of common rules of decency and reason, leading to madness and unhappiness.

The language, pursuits and values of London polite circles in *Cecilia* – all defy the rules of common sense. The world of fashion appears to be governed by a certain logic but this is a logic that resembles that of madness, as is described by Michel Foucault in his *Madness and Civilisation.* Foucault (1988: 108) associates madness not with "reason diseases, or as reason lost or alienated, but quite simply with *reason dazzled*:"

> Dazzlement is night in broad daylight, the darkness that rules at the very heart of what is excessive in light's radiance. Dazzled reason opens its eyes upon the sun and sees *nothing*, that is *does not see* [. . .]
> To say that madness is dazzlement is to say that the madman sees the daylight, the same daylight as the man of reason (both live in the same brightness); but seeing this same daylight, and nothing but this daylight and nothing in it, he sees it as void, as night, as nothing; for him the shadows are the way to perceive daylight. Which means that, seeing the night and nothingness of the night, he does not see at all.

> And believing he sees, he admits as realities the hallucinations of his imagination and all the multitudinous population of night.

Cecilia is surrounded by dazzled figures who act on their own irrational logic. Miss Larolles is the first of the uncritical eulogists of her world, oblivious of its fissures, even if they are pointed out to her.

> [Miss Larolles] beg[ged] leave to recommend to her [Cecilia's] notice her own milliner.
> "I assure you," she continued, "she has all Paris in her disposal; the sweetest caps! the most beautiful trimmings! And her ribbons are quite divine! It is the most dangerous thing you can conceive to go near her; *I never trust myself in her room but I am sure I will be ruined.* If you please, I'll take you to her this morning."
> "*If her acquaintance is so ruinous," said Cecilia, "I think I had better avoid it.*"
> "Oh impossible! There's no such thing as living without her. To be sure she's shockingly dear, that I must own; but then who can wonder? She makes such sweet things, 'tis impossible to pay her too much for them." (Burney 1999: 28–29)

In the world of fashion, where rank and affluence, or at least their appearances, determine the position in society, words of common sense are drowned in the music and murmur of receptions and masquerades, which provide the opportunities to exhibit the luxury goods.

Even the auction sales of bankrupts' property fail to provoke alarm and bring to the senses those in the mad pursuit of costly pleasures. The truth about the madness of such lives seems to be abundantly clear to the outsiders but not to those who belong.

> While they were yet at breakfast, they were again visited by Miss Larolles. "I am come," cried she, eagerly, "to run away with you both to my Lord Belgrade's sale. All the world will be there; and we shall go there with tickets, and you have no notion how it will be crowded."
> "What is to be sold there?" said Cecilia.
> "O every thing you can conceive; house, stables, china, laces, horses, caps, every thing in the world."
> "And do you intend to buy any thing?"
> "Lord, no; but one likes to see the people's things."
> Cecilia then begged they would excuse her attendance.
> "Oh by no means," cried Miss Larolles, "you must go, I assure you; there'll be such a monstrous crowd as you never saw in your life. I dare say we shall be half squeezed to death."

> "That," said Cecilia, "is an inducement which you must not expect will have much weight with a poor rustic just out of the country: *it must require all the polish of a long residence in the metropolis to make it attractive.*
>
> (Burney 1999: 31; italics mine)

Cecilia views the "monstrous crowd" and "see[ing] other people's things" – and Miss Larolles assures her that "it will be the best sale we shall have this season," since "the creditors have seized everything" – for what they are. She looks upon "continual dissipation as an introduction to vice" and "unbounded extravagance as a harbinger of injustice," and they are in conflict with "the sobriety of her education, as it had early instilled into her mind the pure dictates of religion, and strict principles of honour" (Burney 1999: 32). Miss Larolles, however, fails to perceive their sinister aspect and regards them as nothing short of fashionable entertainments.

The same dazzlement of reason is manifested by Mrs Harrel, Cecilia's guardian's wife, whom the ward strives to dissuade from her dissipated lifestyle: "to retrench her expences [sic!], and change her thoughtless way of life for one more considerate and domestic," warning her that "in time her income by such depredation will be exhausted." Earnest though they are, all the attempts to open the woman's eyes to the danger of bankruptcy come to no avail. "Mrs Harrel, with much simplicity, assured her *she did nothing but what everybody else did*, and that it was quite impossible for her *to appear in the world* in any other manner" (Burney 1999: 193).

> The madman [argues Foucault] is not so much the victim of an illusion, of a hallucination of his senses, or of a movement of his mind. He is not *abused*; he *deceives himself*. "We call madmen," Sauvages was to say, "those who are actually deprived of reason or who persist in some notable error; it is this *constant error* of the soul manifest in its imagination, in its judgements, and in its desires, which constitutes the characteristic of this category." (Foucault 1988: 104)

Mrs Harrel becomes an unconscious prisoner of her image of reality, which she cannot go beyond. Like Foucault's madman, she seems to be "inside the image, confiscated by it, and incapable of escaping from it." She "never oversteps the image presented" but "surrenders to its immediacy," unable to act like "a reasonable man who, rightly or wrongly, judges an image to be true or false [. . .] transcends and measures it by what is not itself (Foucault 1988: 94).

Mrs Harrel is immune to all calls of reason. "O, it's a very good proposal, that I agree," she responds to Cecilia's plans of reform, "but only the thing is

it's quite impossible." When importuned as to the reasons why, she repeatedly asserts: "Lord I can't tell – but I know it is – because – I am very sure it is" (Burney 1999: 194). Cecilia, as Burney describes it, "grieved at her blindness" (Burney 1999: 195) and vexed by the new expenses incurred to deceive the world where bankruptcy seems inevitable, exclaims: "Who then at last [. . .] are half so much the slaves of the world as the gay and the dissipated?" (Burney 1999: 360). Appearances, however, can rarely be kept for long if cash runs low. Mr Harrel's suicide in the fashionable gardens of Vauxhall, among the crowds of the fashionable people like himself, is its best evidence. Yet, even the extremity of death fails to awaken the people of pleasure from their dangerous delusions.

It is noteworthy that in the madness of the fashionable world, the only person who is capable of challenging its values in the open is considered as a madman. Mr. Albany, as Mr. Gosford, who serves Cecilia as a guide through the world, explains:

> seems to hold mankind in abhorrence, yet he is never a moment alone, and at the same time he intrudes himself into all parties, he associates with none: he is commonly a stern and silent observer of all that passes, or when he speaks, it is but to utter some sentence of rigid morality, or some bitterness of indignant reproof.
>
> (Burney 1999: 69)

He acts like a prophetic figure who in the sinful world of dissipation scares and annoys the people of fashion pointing to them their hideous vanities. Miss Larolles complains, "[o]ne day he came up to me all of a sudden, and asked me what good I thought I did by dressing so much" (Burney 1999: 290). Captain Aresby has a similar story to tell: "once he took the liberty to ask me, what service I was of to the world! and another time, he desired me to inform him whether I had ever made any poor person pray for me" (Burney 1999: 290). Mr Albany clearly does not fit the world he haunts: by his appearance – "I happened to fall a laughing at his going about in that old coat" (Burney 1999: 290), – or by his language – "without any seeming effort or consciousness, he runs into blank verse perpetually." What is, however, most singular is "the matter of his discourse" (Burney 1999: 291).

Mr Albany's philosophy of life is defined in the total opposition to the principles of the world in which he lives. One of the characters describes it as strange, although it is a reflection of nothing but Christian charity, which was preached from every pulpit: "he thinks the whole world made to live in common, and that every one who is poor should ask, and every one who is

rich should give" (Burney 1999: 209). Yet, the world fails to live up to the simple biblical standards so Mr. Albany's diagnosis of the world is blunt: folly, idleness and luxury have replaced virtue in the life of fashion.

> "Oh times of folly and dissipation!" [. . .] "Oh mignons of idleness and luxury! What next will ye invent for the perdition of your time! How yet further will ye proceed in the annihilation of virtue!" (Burney 1999: 66)

And then he adds, stressing the defiance of the biblical principles of charity:

> "Oh objects of penury and want!" . . ."Oh vassals of famine and distress! Come and listen to the wantonness of wealth! Come, naked and breadless as ye are, and learn how that money is consumed which to you might bring raiment and food!" (Burney 1999: 67)

The impassioned speeches of Mr. Albany delivered in public places fail to produce the desired effect. For the fashionable company he remains a "*crazy-man*" and a "*bore*" (Burney 1999: 67), which is the best illustration of the low esteem his values have in society.

Madness in Cecilia's world is defined as a refusal to conform to the general protocol of life, however illogical and uncharitable it would be. Mrs. Harrel repeatedly asserts she cannot mend her life since "it's what nobody thinks of" and "one must live like other people" (Burney 1999: 194) to the outrage of Cecilia herself, who regards the conformity as an act of gross irrationality:

> But were it not better [. . .] to think less of *other people*, and more of *yourself*? To consult your own fortune, and your own situation in life, instead of being blindly guided by those *other people*? If indeed *other people* would be responsible for your losses, for diminution of your wealth, and for the disorder of your affairs, then might you rationally make their way of life the example of yours: but you cannot flatter yourself such will be the case; you know better; your losses, your diminished fortune, your embarrassed circumstances will be all your own! Pitied, perhaps by some, but blamed by more, and assisted by none! (Burney 1999: 194–95)

Much as Cecilia condemns her friend's conformity with the insanities of the fashionable world, she herself is scarcely prepared to utterly reject it. Cecilia's personality may well be characterised by a "strong sense of DUTY, a fervent desire to ACT RIGHT" as well as a firm conviction that "her affluence" was but a "debt contracted with the poor, and her independence, as a tie upon her liberality to pay it with interest" (Burney 1999: 55). She, however, wants the firmness of character indispensable to defy the world in the open. When

approached by Albany in public, she tries to avoid his company. "I will not only hear, but thank you for your precepts, if you will forbear to give them before so many witnesses," she implores in "a low voice." Mr. Albany clearly resents the "false delicacy" in her:

> "Whence," cried he sternly, these vain and superficial distinctions? Do you not dance in public? What renders you more conspicuous? Do you not dress to be admired, and walk to be observed? Why then this fantastical scruple, *unjustified by reason*, unsupported by analogy? Is *folly* to be published? Is vanity alone to be exhibited? Oh slaves of *thoughtless contradiction*! Oh feeble followers of yet feebler prejudice! Daring to be wicked, yet fearing to be wise; dauntless in levity, yet shrinking from the name of virtue!" (Burney 1999: 293; my emphasis)

Mr. Albany equally forcefully protests against the insincere polite formulas of the language employed by people of fashion. Having been greeted by Cecilia with the usual expression

> "How little, Sir, [...] did I expect this pleasure."
> "This pleasure," repeated he, "do you call it – what strange abuse of words! What causeless trifling with honesty! is language of no purpose but to wound the ear with untruths? Is the gift of speech only granted us to pervert the use of understanding? I can give you no pleasure, I have no power to give any one, you can give none to me – the whole world could not invest you with the means!" (Burney 1999: 702)

The hypocrisy of the culture is ingrained in its idiom – Cecilia's mastery over it is symbolical of her, if only partial, inclusion in it. Mr. Albany's refusal to compromise with the insincerity, dissipation and uncharitability of the world puts him on a par with madmen, although what he calls for is truth and virtue. Cecilia is thus confronted with a choice between the mad reality of the world of fashion and the knight-errantry of Mr Albany, and she fails miserably. Too timid to choose Mr Albany's lifestyle and devote her life and fortune to charity, which was her original plan for life, enamoured with young Deville, whose father obsessed with the family pride objects to his heir's acceptance of the wife's name, Cecilia forfeits her fortune and autonomy.

Burney's novel thus, allegorical as it may seem, hardly brings a moral. The struggles to reconcile various claims laid on its heroine by society and her own conscience, though apparently resolved by a moderately happy ending, fail to mark the way out of the perplexity that a process of initiation into society is bound to produce. Although the story concludes with Cecilia's "imperfect" happiness and reconciliation with the truth "that of the few who had

any happiness, there were none with some misery" and bearing "partial evil with chearfullest resignation" (Burney 1999: 941), Burney's novel does not show the way to follow. Her conduct book remains ambiguous as to what code of conduct would allow to remain in agreement with one's integrity and the strictures of the world. And thus the true conclusion of the novel seems to be the scene where Cecilia, penniless and bereft, rambles the streets of London until she faints in a shop and is taken for a lunatic and nursed by its owners in the expectation of a reward for taking care of a gentlewoman. This is where Burney portrays most aptly the implausibility of constructing an unambiguous book of conduct in the self-contradictory world of fashion of the eighteenth century.

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